

LUCY SPARROW: MY NATIONAL FELT SERVICE PHARMACY IS THE CURE FOR ART SNOBS

ADAM SHERWIN, *INEWS*, APRIL 30, 2021



Every one of the 15,000 items in this 'pharmacy' is painstakingly handcrafted from felt

The shelves are stacked from floor to ceiling with every possible remedy, from lozenges and lotions to Viagra and Tramadol.

But this is no ordinary pharmacy. Every one of the 15,000 items for sale is painstakingly handcrafted from felt.

"Customers come in, they tell me their ailments and I use my medical knowledge to dispense what makes them feel better," says Lucy Sparrow, the white-coat clad artist who presides over Bourdon Street Chemist, a madcap installation which has taken over the Lyndsey Ingram gallery in Mayfair.

Intravenous drips, syringes and surgical instruments have all been stitched by Sparrow (with a team of assistants), whose colourful work employing a fabric fondly remembered from childhood arts and crafts has won the 35-year-old global fame.

"When you buy something I fill in your prescription, I sign it and date it. That acts as your certificate of authenticity that you have bought a work of art," says Sparrow, who is proud to offer a "very inclusive art experience which is not something you would get in Mayfair. I'm happy to be changing that. You can get a big Prozac pill for £10. Something to make everybody happy."

The dispensary is all too convincing. "Quite a few people have wandered in saying 'Ooh, I didn't realise there was a chemists here.' People genuinely think it's a real chemists."

Recreating everyday objects out of felt is an obsession for Sparrow, who has previously taken over a sex shop in Soho, and created textile retail experiences in Beijing, New York and Los Angeles where she installed a supermarket, called Sparrow Mart, that featured 31,000 felt grocery items.

"I love anything that's soft and takes you back to childhood," says the Bath-born artist. "You can create anything out of felt, it's very easy material to use and you can have it in lots of colours."

"I like the dual meaning of 'felt' being the past tense of feelings. I find that emotional connection so interesting."

"I've been sewing since I was six. When you're surrounded by felt it's impossible not to feel some kind of joy and comfort from that. It is nostalgic."

She works from her "felt cave", a former ambulance station in Suffolk repurposed as a multi-coloured workshop, "I've got my Team Felt there. I'll decide what object to make and I design the first one. My assistants cut and sew and then hand it back to me. I hand-paint everything so it's exactly what I want it.

"It's a seven day a week job, 12 hours a day. I wish I could get more sleep. But I'll never get bored of felt."

If she needs to decompress, Sparrow has a "banana room" at the studio, filled with felt fruit. "It is my room full of absolute happiness and joy." She always travels with a banana. "I've actually got a banana with me now, his name is Basil."

Sparrow struggled to gain acceptance for her unusual art. She dropped out of art school and worked as a lapdancer for five years to earn money to buy materials.

"It was how you could get the most amount of money for the least amount of hours put in and devote the rest of the time to making art. I used to sew the dancers' hair extensions, I could do it fast and quick."

A conversation with a gallery owner visiting the club, who suggested she take part in a group show of young artists, gave Sparrow her first break.

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She dismisses critics who say her work is lightweight. "The joy of art is it can be whatever you want. The medium doesn't need to be bronze or stone. That's not what sculpture is about."

"It's funny how it's still a hurdle for some people. 'If it's not painted, it's not art.' We're in 2021, how can this still be a problem?"

There is a serious intent behind her pop-up pharmacy, which was a year in the making. "Frontline workers come in all shapes and sizes and chemists have been providing that support for everyone for over a year now. It's amazing, we've even had the National Association of Pharmacists visit."

She chose a pharmacy as her subject because it is where people reveal their most intimate health problems to strangers. "You go in and whisper to the chemist but they don't care who you are, there's no need to be ashamed. I have fun with that in the show. When people ask for something embarrassing I like to talk about it loudly."

Be warned, a visit to Sparrow's "multi-sensory" National Felt Service outlet is designed to unsettle. "When you leave, you've got this sense of confusion like you've just been spat out of an experience and then you fall back down to earth."

"There is so much felt here it deadens the sound so it really is an assault on all the senses."

Are her accessible Pop Art miniatures too populist for recognition at the Turner Prize? "It hasn't recently been popular art that wins prizes. It's more art for art critics rather than art for people and that's a bit of a shame. I'm really hoping that could change."

She admits: "My absolute all-time dream would be to do a massive hypermarket in the Turbine Hall. As yet I'm waiting for the phone call."

Felt Covid-19 testing kits are on sale at Sparrow's chemists and there is one visitor she is hoping to lure. "We've got our fingers crossed that Chris Whitty will walk by and pop in."

:: Lucy Sparrow presents the Bourdon Street Chemist at Lyndsey Ingram Gallery, 20 Bourdon Street London W1K 3PL until May 6, 11am-6pm. Timed appointments are fully booked but walk-ins prepared for a short wait will be admitted.

More info on the artist www.sewoursoul.co.uk

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